DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 226 369 CS 207 378

AUTHOR Selfe, Cynthia L.
TITLE Using Groups to Pre-Evaluate Papers in the Technical Writing Classroom.
PUB DATE [81]
NOTE 22p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Class Organization; *Group Activities; Group Behavior; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; Peer Evaluation; Role Playing; *Teaching Methods; *Technical Writing; *Writing Evaluation; Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Technical writing teachers who believe in the fundamental value of group work and its potential for helping students preevaluate their papers must deal with the problems associated with the technique by adding structure to student efforts in the areas of group training, group activities, and group evaluation. Explicitly training students to preevaluate papers lets them know the teacher's standards, gives the teacher the chance to demonstrate and discuss appropriate and inappropriate group interaction behaviors, and shows the students that constructive criticism of a paper need not be devastating. Grading criteria sheets and role playing are two structures that also help groups to succeed. Finally, evaluation of the group process itself by both the students and the teacher gives the students the feedback they need to function as a group. (Appendixes include descriptions of group members' and group leaders' roles, an evaluation criteria sheet, a role playing scenario, and a group evaluation form.) (JL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED226369

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

USING GROUPS TO PRE-EVALUATE PAPERS IN THE TECHNICAL WRITING CLASSROOM

Cynthia L. Selfe
Michigan Technological University
Houghton, Michigan 49931
Telephone: (906) 487-5663

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Cynthia L. Selfe

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS207570

The Problem

Group work--seldom has a pedagogical technique promised so much and delivered so little to so many. The promise? Social scientists have been telling us for years that work done in groups is usually superior to work done by individuals. In 1959, for example, Barnlund noted in a discussion of his research that "group decisions were found to be clearly superior to individual decisions" and speculated that individuals in a group setting "find themselves more and more deeply involved" in active learning as they "propose and are forced to defend their ideas." And in 1973 Gerald Holton reminded us that the contributions of four persons working as a group are likely to be "larger (or better)" than four times the contribution of any one of those people working alone. Holton's findings are further supported by Renzulli, Owen, and Callahan who, in 1974, noted that multi-person interactions resulted in increased productivity when compared to individual efforts.

Teachers of composition, upon hearing such claims have taken group work to their collective heart, and have continued to support the technique as a valuable activity in the writing classroom. We have all heard the campaign speeches of Peter Elbow (1973), Ken Bruffee (1973), Thom Hawkins (1976), and James Moffett (1968). They contend that groups are writing teachers' greatest allies in the war against increasing workloads; that groups can provide the feedback necessary for effective revisions of student papers; that they can help train students, through interaction, to become better writers; and that groups can act effectively as screening agencies which pre-evaluate papers before a teacher ever sees them.

The reality of group work, however, might be quite different from the rosy picture these supporters paint. Peter Mansbridge (1973), for instance, has found that groups can be inordinately time-consuming, spending up to three

times longer than individuals in completing a given task. Further, both Barnlund (1959) and Thelen (1960) have documented anxiety as a by-product of group processes.

In the technical writing classroom, these and other drawbacks have many teachers seriously concerned about the value of group work. I am sure you hear the same complaints I do every semester--stories of classes in which groups just do not seem to work--groups that waste class time, groups that cannot seem to get the hang of effective peer critiquing, groups that produce final papers that read like first drafts. Scholars in our field are beginning to document and analyze these problems. We are now seeing tentative criticisms of group work surfacing. Elizabeth Flynn, for example, at the 1982 Conference on College Composition and Communication suggested that the group critiques of papers made by students in her class were often less useful than her own preliminary readings because the untrained students were hesitant to criticize their classmates' papers and often imposed imaginary structure and coherence on a disorganized, incoherent piece of writing.

One Solution

If we believe in the fundamental value of group work and its potential for helping students pre-evaluate their papers in the technical writing classroom, we must deal with the problems associated with the technique. We must, in other words, do our own homework before we ask our students to engage in group work. I suggest that part of our homework will involve more careful, thorough, and deliberate preparation for group work in our classes. We cannot turn our students "loose" to work in groups; if we want our groups to succeed as effective pre-evaluators, we must add structure to their efforts in our

classrooms. In the remainder of this paper I will suggest how to add structure to three areas--group training, group activities, and group evaluation--in a technical writing class.

Structuring Group Training

We have all seen situations in which groups act effectively to relieve the technical writing teacher's workload. But as social psychologists like Thelen (1960) tell us, groups have the greatest potential for being effective at their tasks if their members are trained in group interaction. If we expect our groups to act as effective pre-evaluators of student papers, that is if we expect the groups to inspire effective revisions of drafts and produce successful final products, we must train them to do so. We cannot expect students to take on our own evaluative role without having the training we have been afforded. One part of this training involves teaching students to look at papers as we look at them, and this takes practice. In my technical writing class, I spend three or four early class periods training students to evaluate papers as I might evaluate them. In small groups we look at a number of assignments and papers written in previous years and practice judging them according to specific criteria--informative value, concision, audience awareness, graphics design.

This exercise serves several purposes. First it lets students know my own standards--what I look for in a technical writing assignment; what I mean when I talk about layout, audience profiles, and accuracy; what priorities I have adopted for their papers. With this information they can do a better job of writing in my class and appealing to me as an audience. Second, this exercise gives me a chance to demonstrate and discuss appropriate and inappropriate group interaction behaviors--behaviors which can mean the

success or the failure of any group effort (Appendix A). As a class we role play and then talk about those behaviors that facilitate and coordinate the group pre-evaluation process--behaviors like asking questions, summarizing, testing for consensus, audience simulation, and compromise. We also point out those behaviors that are counter-productive to effective group work--seeking sympathy, apologizing, withdrawing, and generally horsing around. When students are made aware of the negative or positive effects of various group behaviors, they become more sensitive to their own role in group interaction and begin to see how they might individually contribute to the success or the failure of the group effort. Finally, this exercise also allows the student groups to see that constructive criticism of a paper need not be devastating and that such criticism lies at the heart of any successful pre-evaluation. They begin to see that after examining a paper with the help of an active, well-trained group of peer critics most writers can improve their products significantly.

At this time, before we actually begin the writing work of the year, we also outline in our groups the characteristics needed by effective group leaders (Appendix B). We talk about the need to provide direction, time activities, draw hesitant group members into a discussion and encourage positive group behaviors. We also role play difficult group situations where the leader is too directive or too laissez faire, and students begin to perceive the special responsibilities a leader must assume if group work is to proceed effectively. During the year, I ask each group member to take a turn as a group leader and practice the skills we define.

Structuring Group Activities.

But providing structured training for groups may not be enough. As

teachers we can also make it easier for our groups to succeed if we provide them structure in the activities we ask them to do. Again, it is a matter of providing them with the techniques we have learned through our own experience and training. Many of us, for example, use a grading criteria sheet to evaluate student papers when we receive them. I have found it useful to provide pre-evaluating groups with the same grading sheet that I use. Such a list of criteria can act as a focus for group activities and an outline for any written critical response they make to a paper (Appendix C). Often I ask the groups to read a student paper and then to compose group paragraphs that evaluate the paper according to each of ten criteria (format, audience, awareness, accuracy, concision, etc.) I have listed on a grading sheet handout. In accomplishing this task, the groups must reach an evaluative decision about how well the author answered each criteria through discussion and consensus. The group member whose paper is being discussed must act as an observer only and refrain from responding to the group's discussion of his or her paper. This eliminates the temptation to center the group discussion on "what I meant to say" or to apologize needlessly for a less-than-perfect, initial writing effort.

Another method of structuring group activities is through role playing. It is becoming increasingly popular in the technical writing classroom to simulate "real world" writing situations. This is done by having students correspond with real business agencies, by having them research and write about real business problems, or by having students' papers evaluated by colleagues outside the English department or the university. Simulation can also, however, be accomplished through small groups in a classroom setting. I often structure group activities by writing specific scenarios that assign each group member the role of some "real world" participant (Appendix D).

Thus, if the technical writing assignment involves composing a preliminary proposal for a project, I assign each group member a role within an imaginary company--one may act as the project director, one as an engineer, one as a vice president, etc. Students take five minutes to "expand" their character--inventing names, personalities, educational levels, salaries, and priorities of the individuals they have been a assigned--and two minutes to introduce these characters to the group before they begin to critique the proposal. The proposals are then evaluated by these "real world" characters. This exercise adds a very effective structure to group activities. In this case, group members, depending on the character they have assumed, use their own criteria for pre-evaluating papers and write a short critique based on their character's evaluation of the proposal's effectiveness.

Structuring Evaluation

Finally, I would like to suggest adding structure to group work through evaluation, not evaluation of student papers this time but evaluation of the group process itself. If we hope to make the pre-evaluative groups in our classrooms more effective, we must provide them feedback that deals with their ability to function as a group. For this, I suggest any one of a number of group evaluation instruments currently available. The evaluation included in Appendix E, for example, gives members group a chance to rate their own performance as a group and as individuals participating in the group process. I fill out a similar instrument every time I sit in on a group discussion for a half an hour or more. This type of evaluation forces a group take a critical look at itself and its members. Because I fill out a similar form, the group can also compare its perceptions to my evaluation of their activities. I believe this component, perhaps more than any other in my

technical writing classes, has resulted in improved group work because it establishes a two-way line of communication between myself and my students. It also indicates to students that group work, in itself, is an important part--an evaluated part--of my technical writing classroom.

Discussion

I believe that group work can be a most useful component in the technical writing classroom. I also believe, however, that group work can fail miserably if teachers refuse to structure initial group training, group activities, and final group evaluations. As evidence, I can at this point offer only personal observations. I know, for instance, that since I have been structuring the pre-evaluative group work my classes do, I have recorded an increased standard of excellence in the final products they hand me. I have also been less troubled by groups that do not seem productive or on-task. During the semester, as the groups in my technical writing classroom become more adept, they are able to bear more of the evaluative burden for the class. They are training, in effect, for my job, and the more they learn about it, the better they are able to perform.

Finally, I find the very structured group work that we do in my technical writing class helps to outfit my engineering and technical students for their first job in industry. I have realized that the personal interaction skills my students master as they learn to work effectively in a group will serve them well when they engage in collegial activities in their workplace.

APPENDIX A

GROUP MEMBERS' ROLES

FUNCTIONAL

A. Initiating activity: promoting solutions, suggesting new ideas, offering new definitions of problems

B. Seeking information: asking for clarification of suggestions, requesting additional information or facts

C. Seeking opinion: looking for an expression of feeling about something from other members in the group

D. Giving information: offering facts or generalizations, relating one's own experience to group problems to illustrate a point

E. Elaborating: clarifying, giving examples, or developing meanings, trying to envision how a proposal might work out if tried

F. Giving opinion: stating an opinion concerning a suggestion or one of several suggestions, particularly concerning its value rather than its factual basis

G. Coordinating: showing relationships among various ideas

H. Summarizing: pulling together related ideas or suggestions, restating suggestions after the group has discussed them

I. Testing feasibility: making application of suggestions to real situations, examining practicality and workability of ideas, pre-evaluating decisions

NON-FUNCTIONAL

A. Being aggressive: working for status by criticizing or blaming others, showing hostility against the group or individuals, deflating the ego or status of another group member

B. Blocking: interfering with the process of the group by going off on a tangent, citing personal experiences unrelated to the task, arguing too much on one point, rejecting ideas without consideration

C. Self confession: using the group as a sounding board, expressing personal non-group-oriented feelings or points of view

D. Competing: vying with others to produce the best idea, talk the most, play the most important roles, gain favor with the leader

E. Seeking sympathy: trying to induce other group members to be sympathetic to one's problems or misfortunes, deploring one's situation, or disparaging one's own ideas

F. Special pleading: introducing suggestions related to one's own pet concerns, lobbying

G. Horsing around: clowning, joking, mimicking, disrupting the group work with jests

H. Seeking recognition: attempting to call attention to one's self by loud or excessive talking, extreme or unusual behavior

I. Withdrawing: acting indifferent or passive, resorting to excessive formality, daydreaming, doodling, whispering to others, wandering from the subject

(Benne, Kenneth D., and Paul Sheats, "Functional Roles of Group Members," Journal of Social Issues, IV, 1948, 41-49.)

APPENDIX B

GROUP LEADERS' ROLES

A. Encouraging: being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas, accepting contributions of others

B. Gate keeping: attempting to solicit a response from another group member

C. Standard setting: expressing standards for the group to use in its activities

D. Following: going along with others, somewhat passively, serving as an audience during group discussions and decision-making process

E. Expressing group feeling: summarizing what group feeling is sensed to be, describing reactions of the group to ideas or solutions

F. Evaluating: submitting group decisions or accomplishments to comparison with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals

G. Diagnosing: determining sources of difficulty, defining appropriate processes, identifying the main blocks to group progress

H. Testing for consensus: tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out how far the group is from consensus

I. Mediating: harmonizing, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions

J. Relieving Tension: avoiding negative feelings by joking or putting a tense situation into a wider context

(Benne, Kenneth D., and Paul Sheats, "Functional Roles of Group Members," Journal of Social Issues, IV, 1948, 41-49.)

APPENDIX C

EVALUATION CRITERIA:

Memo Assignment

1. Informative value: Is the information stated clearly? Is all the necessary information available to the reader?

   _____ (5 pts.)

2. Concision: Is the memo as short as possible? Free of wordiness?

   _____ (5 pts.)

3. Organization: Is the information in the memo arranged in the most effective manner? Would alternative arrangements be more effective?

   _____ (10 pts.)

4. Format: Was the author familiar with the format for memos within the company? Is the memo dated? Is the audience and author identified?

   _____ (5 pts.)

5. Layout: Did the author make effective use of white space, bullets, listing, indenting, etc.?

   _____ (5 pts.)

6. Audience: Did the author take into account the audience for whom the memo was written?

   _____ (5 pts.)

7. Grammar and Usage: Did the author follow the conventional rules of grammar and usage?

   _____ (5 pts.)

8. Style: Was the language used in the memo direct and clear? Did the author avoid passives? Over-long sentences? The use of too many prepositional phrases in one sentence?

   _____ (5 pts.)

9. Accuracy: Was the information included in the memo precise and accurate?

   _____ (5 pts.)

5 pts.	15 pts.	25 pts.	40 pts.	50 pts.
Needs quite a bit of work; see Dr. Selfe	Not as good as you would like it to be!	Average	Needs a bit more work	Profes-sional and informative

APPENDIX D

SCENARIO

Author

You are a consultant for Enterprise Services Inc., a public relations firm in Houghton, Michigan. Your boss has considered promoting you to a supervisory position this year, but he wants to see how you react to a really tough project. Last week, he handed you a letter from a local university that wants to map out a public relations campaign for their new community college outreach program. This program is designed to attract community members, and it offers a two-year associate degree. The classes in this program will be held at night and will be aimed at people who are not planning to go on for four-year degrees. There will be degrees offered in computer systems, bookkeeping and accounting, nursing, electronics, and medical technology. The community members living near the university are not enthusiastic about the program at this time. Your job is to design a public relations campaign that will make them receptive and willing to enroll. At least four people will read your preliminary proposal: the president of the university, the vice-president in charge of public relations, the vice-president of financial affairs, and the director of the planned, two-year program.

Your project must be completed in four weeks. The estimated costs are $50,000.

Audience

President: The community has been criticizing your university for failing to do enough outreach work. There is a strong feeling of antipathy between the townspeople and the university employees. Alumnae(i) have contributed $50,000 in support of this project. You are so busy that you have little of your personal time to devote to this project.

Vice-President of Public Relations: The President has charged you with making sure that the public looks favorably on this two-year degree program. You know the community people; they are hard working miners and small business owners. Since the cost of copper has fallen over the last thirty years, 17% of the community are unemployed. Most of them distrust the university. If you don't make this project successful, you will be looking for another job.

Vice-President of Finances: Sure the alumnae(i) have pledged $50,000 but they don't always produce what they have pledged. Moreover, the new library is clamoring for funds for books, and the state accreditation board reminded you last week that your science laboratories must be updated this year. Finally, you happen to know that the state is going to withdraw their $25,000 contract for surveying government lands in your area. Where is the money going to come from? Are each of the proposed expenditures thoroughly supported?

Director of the Two-Year Program: This is your chance to make an impression in your field. If you can make this a successful program in four years, you can move out of Michigan's upper peninsula (300 inches of snow each year!) and down to a nice state university job in Florida. You must, therefore, make sure this public relations man does his job. Is his campaign thorough? Well-planned? Attractive? You will read his proposal with a critical eye, but you are hoping that he will succeed.

APPENDIX E

Group Work Evaluation I

Some of the purposes of group work have been identified in your training program. You know, therefore, that people meet as groups to share ideas, stimulate one another, divide required work, solve problems through group processes, and discuss topics of interest. You also know that evaluation is an important part of the group process and that it can help to improve the effectiveness of a group. Please try to answer the following evaluative questions as honestly as possible.

1. Our group worked together

   Extremely well — Fairly well — Very Poorly

2. I am satisfied with the accomplishments of the group to the following extent

   Extremely satisfied — Fairly satisfied — Not at all satisfied

3. Taking into account participation, cooperation, and production rate yourself and each member of your group individually on the following scales

   Name: _____

   Excellent — Fair — Poor

   Name: _____

   Excellent — Fair — Poor

   Name: _____

   Excellent — Fair — Poor

   Name: _____

   Excellent — Fair — Poor

Bibliography

Barnlund, D. C. "A Comparative Study of Individual, Majority, and Group Judgment." Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 1959, 58, 55-63.

Bruffee, Kenneth, "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models," College English, 34 (February 1973), 634-43.

Elbow, Peter, Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Elbow, Peter, Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

Flynn, Elizabeth, "Freedom, Restraint, and Peer Group Interaction." Conference on College Composition and Composition, San Francisco, 1981. ERIC ED 216 365.

Hawkins, Thom, Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing (Urbana, Ill.: ERIC/NCTE, 1976).

Holton, Gerald, Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought: Kepler to Einstein. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973)

Mansbridge, J. J. "Time, Emotions and Inequality: Three Problems of Participatory Groups." Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 1973, 9, 2 and 3, 351-368.

Moffett, James, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

Renzulli, J. S.; Owen, S. V.; and Callahan, C. M., "Fluency, Flexibility and Originality as a Function of Group Size." Journal of Creative Behavior, 1974, 8(2), p. 107-113.

Thelen, H. Education and the Human Quest, (New York: Harper & Row, 1960.)